



# Decolonising Development Theory and Practice: The Role of Religious Knowledge

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# An unequal system of knowledge production

01

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DOMINANCE OF WESTERN EUROPE/NORTH AMERICA DICTATING THEORY AND PARADIGMS AND WHAT MATTERS AS VALID KNOWLEDGE

02

MATERIAL INEQUALITIES WITH MOST FUNDING BEING LOCATED IN THE SO-CALLED GLOBAL NORTH DICTATING ITS OWN STANDARDS OF PRACTICE & PERFORMANCE (THEORY OF CHANGE, RESULTS-BASED, VALUE FOR MONEY, IMPACT, CAPACITY BUILDING, ETC.)

03

IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL ASYMMETRIES WITH SO-CALLED GLOBAL (A.K.A NORTHERN) AGENDAS DOMINATING THE FIELDS OF DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES (AGENDA 2030, SDGS, ETC.)



# What do we mean by epistemological dominance?

- ◆ Individuals are always 'epistemologically situated', which means that their worldview influences their conceptual, theoretical and analytical framework.
- ◆ Historically, the Western European colonisers projected their worldviews, interests and understandings of humanity onto the 'other.' Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer and academic, referring to colonialism wrote:

*...its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. (1986, 16).*
- ◆ In contemporary times, lack of recognition about the epistemological situatedness of historical paradigms and limited self-reflexivity about personal positionality in research, knowledge production and development practice means that western assumptions continue to be transposed cross-culturally and to dictate standards and paradigms.

# International development as the continuation of the 'civilising mission'

- ◆ International development was built on the legacy of the 'civilising mission' (Manji and O'Coill 2002; Rist 2014; Istratii 2020). Western Christian missions followed trade, not eschewing some convergence/collaboration with local rulers.
- ◆ Development in the post-World War II era was characterised by secularisation, economic growth theories and a general neglect of religion.
- ◆ Development in the 21st century engaged with religious engagements within the dictates of secularism (trends such as: Religious Freedom as a right, Faith-based actors as development agents, emergence of Liberation Theologies).
- ◆ Currently engagement remains Eurocentric (a lack of sufficient engagement with theology and exegetical traditions, Western epistemological tendency of demarcating spheres of human existence, such as secular/religious, public/private and reason/faith persists, FBOs engaged largely in instrumentalist ways by the development sector, etc.).



## The role of religion in colonialism

Provided the moral narrative for ending slave trade by British abolitionists with evangelical affiliations (e.g. William Wilberforce 1759-1833, Thomas Fowell Buxton 1768-1845)



*“The hope, therefore, of effecting Africa's civilization, and of inducing her tribes to relinquish the trade in man, is, without this assistance, utterly vain. This mighty lever, when properly applied, can alone overturn the iniquitous systems which prevail throughout that continent. **Let missionaries and schoolmasters, the plough and the spade, go together, and agriculture will flourish; the avenues to legitimate commerce will be opened; confidence between man and man will be inspired; whilst civilization will advance as the natural effect, and Christianity operate as the proximate cause of this happy change.**”*

(Buxton 1840: 511)

*\*\*With special thanks to Dr Joerg Haustein for exposing me to the intersections of colonialism and religion, as well as Buxton's works.*

# Colonial legacies in how 'religion' has been theorised cross-culturally

- ◆ 'Religion' emerged as a universal concept in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Different thinkers engaged with 'religion' in ways that resonated with the stage of western development, such as analysing 'religion' as a natural phenomenon, as a transcendental thing-in-itself (*sui generis*), or as a symbolic system, with non-western religions being analysed in reference to what was perceived to be a superior western Christianity.
- ◆ Although in recent years this epistemology of religion has diversified, motivating the infamous 'world religions' paradigm and more hermeneutical approaches, deeply western entrenched assumptions about what 'religion' is have yet to be overcome. For example, this remains deeply grounded in humanistic notions of religious conscience, assuming a division between conscience (as belief) and its embodiment (as practice), as well as attaches an attribute of individuality to conscience, which need not be the case in societies whose faith is intertwined with collective values, histories and identities as in this one.
- ◆ Gender critiques of religion have also contributed to essentialising trends: employing a west-centric gender theory and a feminist 'hermeneutics of suspicion' responding to western biblical traditions, prominent feminist scholars have displayed essentialising tendencies that present all 'theology' (especially Christian traditions) as 'patriarchal' or 'sexist', showing limited reflexivity of historical and exegetical differences across traditions and geographies



# ‘Religion’ and Gender and Development

- ❖ Dominance of western metaphysics of humanity and gender in the definition of gender and conceptualisation of gender relations, e.g. by predicating gender on biology and visual indicators (Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, 1997; Ifi Amadiume 1987, Arnfred 2011). Mainstream gender theory underpinned by the assumption of hierarchical gender, ignoring plurality in gender relations and status of women across the world (Nkiru Uwechia Nzengwu, 2006; Istratii 2020).
- ❖ A gender theory originating in a secular logic and social constructionist western feminist metaphysics has been presented as authoritative, while non-secular, non-materialist/religious worldviews espoused by many tradition-oriented communities has been deemed unintelligible. The ethical problem of transposing a western secular metaphysics as normative, while criticising normativity, has not been given due attention.
- ❖ Interventions that pursue gender equality in ways not attuned to local belief and value systems have appeared neo-colonial, causing backlash (Oluwafunmilayo Para-Mallam et al., 2011; Mannell, 2012). Very little research has explored alleviation strategies within religious worldviews and context-specific socio-cultural systems, leveraging on religio-cultural resources.

# ‘Religion’ and Public Health

- ◆ There are numerous programmes in public health that engage with religious stakeholders (e.g. in addressing HIV/AIDS, harmful cultural practices that affect women and girls, etc.), but the sector has not eschewed conceptualisations of ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ that demarcate religious beliefs and conscience in humanistic ways and fail to embed them in wider normative frameworks and societal structures.
- ◆ Community-based organisations that work with religious stakeholders tend to take a more holistic, culture-sensitive approach that may be more effective and well-received in communities.



# 'Religion' and the Humanitarian Sector

- ◆ Religious parameters have received minimal attention in the humanitarian scholarship, and should be better integrated when appraising alleviation strategies in conflict , post-conflict contexts and displaced populations.
- ◆ The resourcefulness of faith, theology and religious stakeholders is not generally considered, fully leveraged or systematically assessed, although numerous studies exist evidencing that religious beliefs and spiritual activity serve as a coping and healing mechanisms for victims/survivors.

# There is no 'religion' *per se* but context-specific religio-cultural belief systems

- ◆ One must differentiate between theological, dogmatic or exegetical tenets and the lived religious life of the clergy and laity, without however isolating the two levels of experience.
- ◆ For most non-western societies that eschewed the specific experience of western secularism, religious parameters intermesh with culture-specific normative systems and folklore life. One may speak of religio-cultural belief systems and frameworks that need to be understood in historical and context-specific ways.
- ◆ Still, often clergy and laity will differentiate between 'faith' and 'culture', and the way in which they conceptualise the relationship will determine their responses to social norms that prevail and their openness to deviating from/changing accepted standards and practices.



This analysis can be found in my recent monograph. Four open access chapters can be freely accessed on SDGO, including the introductory theoretical argument:

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/search?key=istratii&context=sdgo>

*Routledge Research in Religion and Development*

# **ADAPTING GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT TO LOCAL RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS**

**A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE  
IN ETHIOPIA**

Romina Istratii



**Building Bridges  
of Faith Against  
Domestic Violence**

Project dldl/ድልድል: Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence: A novel approach for Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK



# THE PROJECT

UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship (£1,287,659) to bring to fruition a challenging and novel project titled “Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence: A novel approach for Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK”

The project seeks to promote a decolonial approach to addressing domestic violence by engaging substantively with the religio-cultural belief systems of domestic violence victims/survivors and perpetrators and understanding how these interface with gender, material and psychological parameters to facilitate or deter domestic violence.

It will generate new research and intervention approaches working with Ethiopian and Eritrean collaborators and rural and urban communities and will apply knowledge from the respective countries to inform approaches for integrating and supporting better ethnic minority and migrant populations affected by domestic violence in the UK.



*dldl* means 'bridge' in Tigrigna, a term that reflects the project's aim of bridging different disciplines, sectors and stakeholders in order to achieve a more reflexive, decolonial and integrated approach to addressing domestic violence in faith communities

- ❖ The project evolved from previous long-term PhD research in Aksum, Tigray region, Ethiopia, and reflects many years' consultations and discussions with friends and colleagues in Aksum, Mekelle and Addis Ababa.
- ❖ It builds upon old and new partnerships with academic and non-governmental organisations, including Aksum University (Aksum, Ethiopia), the St Frumentius Abba Selama Kessate Berhan Theological College (Mekelle, Ethiopia), the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), Diversity Resource International (Brighton, UK) and its sister-branch Waniney (Asmara, Eritrea), the University of Bristol (Bristol, UK) and the University of Sheffield (Sheffield, UK).





# The project has four broad aims defined by country/context:

- To develop and to implement religion-sensitive domestic violence interventions for victims and perpetrators in Ethiopia;
- To explore the importance of religio-cultural parameters in domestic violence attitudes and responses in Eritrea and to build local capacity for more integrated approaches;
- To investigate attitudes and responses to domestic violence among Ethiopian, Eritrean and other migrant communities in the UK, and to build the preparedness of community organisations and religious personnel to respond more effectively;
- To establish the extent to which religio-cultural parameters are considered in current domestic violence services provision in the UK, and to produce a roadmap for improving religio-cultural literacy and sensitivity.

# How project dldl/ድልድል works to achieve meaningful impact:

- ❖ Our main premise is that meaningful and impactful interventions emerge when they are designed from the ground up informed by empirical evidence and real-life experiences.
- ❖ The project aims to use sustainable and dialogical strategies in order to ensure continuity, such as by connecting with existing domestic violence infrastructures and systems and avoiding duplication, brokering cross-sectoral learning, partnerships and awareness through knowledge exchange activities and public engagement, working dialogically with partners, stakeholders and communities and employing people-centred research methodologies and practices; and relying on context-specific evidence and developing new understanding.
- ❖ We work with the religious departments and bodies that are directly relevant to our work (e.g. EOC DICAC, Mehibere Qedusan, EWLA), ensuring that we are integrated within the existing institutional and referral framework to avoid duplication and to develop working relationships of trust and effective interventions.





# Building awareness through dialogical and reflection-based workshops with clergy

These include three learning units:

- a) presentation of ethnographic realities of domestic violence in Ethiopian societies and the role/influence of the clergy;
- b) teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahädo* Church on gender relations, marriage, conjugal cohabitation and domestic violence complemented by St John Chrysostom's relevant homilies about the same;
- c) information on the legal framework on domestic violence, available referral system and safeguarding information and advice/





Responding to SGBV in the Tigray crisis, Ethiopia: Stressing the role of faith and clergy

- ◆ In November 2020, a new conflict erupted in Tigray region, where the initial research sites of project dldl/ድልድል were planned to be. Widespread violence has been reported against civilians in the current conflict, including systematic bombings of residential places, intentional and repeated sexual and physical violence against women and girls, executions of men and boys, as well as indirect violence such as in the form of children being maimed by landmines, bombs or stray bullets (Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).
- ◆ In early months no acknowledgement was made of the local religious tradition and clergy in the mediation of marriage and community issues and their potential to support victims/survivors of SGBV. This has started to change with more stakeholders recognising the centrality of the clergy and faith in this context.
- ◆ Tigray is a deeply religious society with the indigenous Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* Christianity having been formally embraced in the ancient capital of Aksum, to which the majority of Tigray's population adheres (FDRE, 2008, p. 111). Thus, people's realities, attitudes and norms need to be contextualised in this religious tradition.
- ◆ The clergy are directly involved in the mediation of conjugal problems and despite some lacking complete awareness of the extent of the problem of conjugal abuse in their societies, theological knowledge to respond to marriage-related issues with confidence and preparedness to support victims and perpetrators with the utmost sensitivity to risks involved, the majority tried to prioritise the safety of the usually female victim and comprised an important resource when other institutions failed to have an impact (Istratii, 2021). However, it should be considered that victims of violence would not always report to their spiritual fathers the true nature of their problems, but would often minimise it.
- ◆ Any efforts to engage the clergy in awareness-raising and integrated community approaches should consider the clergy's culture-specific socialisation as men and their influence in society, their theological training and gaps in knowledge, and their level of exposure to safeguarding risks and trauma understanding. An approach that integrates wisely the clergy would not only leverage on the work that the clergy are already doing on the ground (which still goes unrecognised), but would ensure that the clergy do not become conducive to the wider system of victim silencing or re-traumatisation by being excluded from awareness campaigns and community-wide interventions.



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Thank you

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